

After making a splash with her medal haul this summer, Paralympian **ELLIE SIMMONDS** reveals why she's happy to be different

BY **ANTONIA HOYLE**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **SEAN MCMENOMY**

**N**obody captured the nation's heart this summer quite like Ellie Simmonds. As poster girl for the Paralympics, she propelled herself through the swimming pool with power that belied her 4ft frame. With every stroke, we screamed at our televisions, willing her to bag gold.

And as she was interviewed poolside afterwards, choking back the tears, we sobbed along with her. At just 17 years old, she picked up two gold medals, a silver and a bronze, and smashed two world records in the process.

Rarely has *Fabulous* had a more deserving or inspirational cover star, and as Ellie prepares for her photo shoot, it seems she's as chuffed at the prospect as we are.

"Every girl likes being pampered," she smiles. "The stuff I'm getting to do – photo shoots like this – is amazing."

Having spent the past year getting up at 5.20am every day and swimming 40km (around 25 miles) each week, her incredible success is only just starting to sink in.

"Now it's been a few weeks since the Paralympics, I'm getting used to it all. We showed we can go out there and achieve our dreams," she says.

Following those dreams hasn't been easy for Ellie. Not only has she had to cope with the cut-throat nature of the sporting world while still just a schoolgirl, she has also had to deal with the physical limitations of her disability.

Ellie was born with achondroplasia, the most common form of dwarfism and a genetic disorder that affects around one in every 25,000 babies. Most achondroplastic dwarfs grow to be around 4ft tall.

But she hates the idea that she has "overcome adversity", because she insists there was none to overcome.

"I've always been aware [that I was shorter]," she says simply.

"I don't remember my mum and dad telling me anything. They always treated me like I'm just a normal person. They said if I wanted to achieve something I shouldn't let it stop me."

The only difficulty she encounters, she says, is "reaching things". No one has treated her negatively, nobody comments on her height or makes an issue of it. Least of all Ellie.

"It hasn't affected me at all. I'm just a bit small. I'm just different. It's good to be different."

Achondroplasia has caused her one major health problem, however. In 2007, when she was 12, she had an operation on her legs to stop them bowing – a common problem with dwarfism. She was reliant on a Zimmer frame for months.

But Ellie being Ellie, she was back in the pool, swimming using only her arms, after just three weeks.

She doesn't get wound up about discrimination against the disabled and lets other people's ignorance wash over her.

"It doesn't bother me. Some people are what they are and can't help it."

### Independent WOMAN

**E**llie's mother Val, 58, who has accompanied her to our shoot today, says her superstar daughter was five or six when she first questioned why she was smaller than her classmates.

She says: "She'd come home from school asking why she was the smallest. I'd explain matter-of-factly that the bones in her arms and legs don't grow as fast as everyone else's."

Both Val and her husband Steve, 61, an environmental consultant, are average height. They played a key role in nurturing Ellie's independent attitude.

"If you're not careful you can make too many allowances," says Val, who quite happily chats away while Ellie has her hair and make-up done. "We haven't expected any exceptions to be made for her. She doesn't see it as an issue and finds it hard to understand why people think it is. You just want them to be →

# ELLIE Of a Girl

Ellie wears: dress, River Island; collar, New Look

accepted as they are.”

By “them” Val is also including Ellie’s sister Katie, 24, a draughtswoman who also has dwarfism.

“Katie didn’t give Ellie advice, but Ellie was always competitive and determined to beat Katie,” says Val, who also has two older daughters and a son, who are all of average height.

Nobody in the family is anywhere near as sporty as Ellie. As a little girl, she enjoyed ballet and riding her Welsh pony called Blodwyn and needed minimal adaptation to the family home.

“We had some stools to help them [Ellie and Katie] reach things,” laughs Val. “But it was a nuisance when we visited my sister who had high light switches and latches on the doors. We’d shut the doors and hear little voices saying: ‘We can’t get out!’”

### A-list LIFESTYLE

**A**fter picking up gold in the 400m freestyle and individual medley, and bronze in the 50m freestyle at the Olympic Park Aquatics Centre this summer, Ellie says she didn’t sleep at all the night before her 100m freestyle – for which she won silver – because of “nerves and everything”. It was only afterwards that she felt “relief and happiness”.

Since those heady weeks, she has been fêted by everyone from politicians to pop stars. She’s just back from Paris Fashion Week, to which she was personally invited by Stella McCartney, who she describes as “amazing”. Stella designed a glittery blue dress especially for her.

David Cameron, who presented Ellie with her gold medal, was “all right”. Alan Carr, whose *Chatty Man* talk show she appeared on in September, was “hilarious” and The Wanted – who she met at the Super Saturday concert at Clapham Common – were “really cool”.

She says she didn’t get to attend the many showbiz parties thrown around the capital in honour of our sporting stars, and hasn’t had so much as a sip of champagne to celebrate.

“I’m 17 – it’s illegal, isn’t it?” she offers by way of an explanation.

If she sounds a little blasé about rubbing shoulders with the cream of the celebrity world, it’s perhaps understandable. Once you’ve been presented with an MBE by the Queen at Buckingham Palace, as Ellie was back in 2009 aged just 14, everything else must seem a little humdrum.

“That was a big honour,” she says. “I was nervous. You have to curtsy and not put your back towards her. I thought: ‘Oh gosh, what if I do something wrong?’ She congratulated



## ‘I’m NOT a CELEB, I’m a SPORTSPERSON’

me and asked what my favourite strokes were.”

Ellie was last recognised this morning by her hotel concierge on the way to our photo shoot.

“I don’t get mobbed. People respect me,” she says. “But I wouldn’t say I’m a celebrity. I’m just a sportsperson.”

She repeats this point so many times during our time together, it’s almost like a mantra. Yet whether Ellie believes it or not, having first found fame aged just 13 at the Beijing Paralympics – when she won gold in the 100m and 400m freestyle and became our youngest Paralympian ever to collect a medal – she *is* a bona fide star and people want to know more about her.

However, as excited as she is about our photo shoot, →

who have devoted their time and money to helping Ellie become the best in her field.

Her life in the pool began when she was five. At eight years old, she was competing against swimmers of average height.

In 2004, aged nine, she was inspired by the Athens Paralympics. They spurred her on to train harder, which led to her being selected for the GB squad. Two years after that, Ellie and her mum moved 150 miles away from the family home in Aldridge in the West Midlands to Swansea, so she could train with Billy Pye, a coach who specialises in training Paralympians, at the 50m Wales National Pool.

Ellie and Val still live there – away from the rest of the family – from Sunday night to Saturday morning. It is quite a sacrifice on her mum's part. "It's been difficult but you give your child every opportunity," says Ellie. "I'm sure I will when I'm older and have children myself."

## Best BEHAVIOUR

**T**he Ellie that emerges post-photo-shoot is much more relaxed, though she admits that the pressure of being a role model at such a young age can be tough.

"Sometimes it's hard," she says, in a rare moment of vulnerability. "You have to be smiley all the time because you can't be seen as tired. You want to be seen as a nice person, so when you're in a mood you've got to be good."

She's hugely independent, refusing her mum's offer to sit in on our interview and admits: "Every teenager argues with their parents. We're all hormonal. Me and my mum are close but I was always closer to my dad. When I'm with my dad at the weekend it means more because I don't see him a lot."

She still has ambition coursing through her and wants to be a fixture in many future Games.

"I'll take everything as it comes. You never know where you're going to go in life, or if you won't enjoy it."

Her medals take pride of place in the living-room cabinet. But she still hasn't watched those tearful poolside interviews that made us fall in love with her.

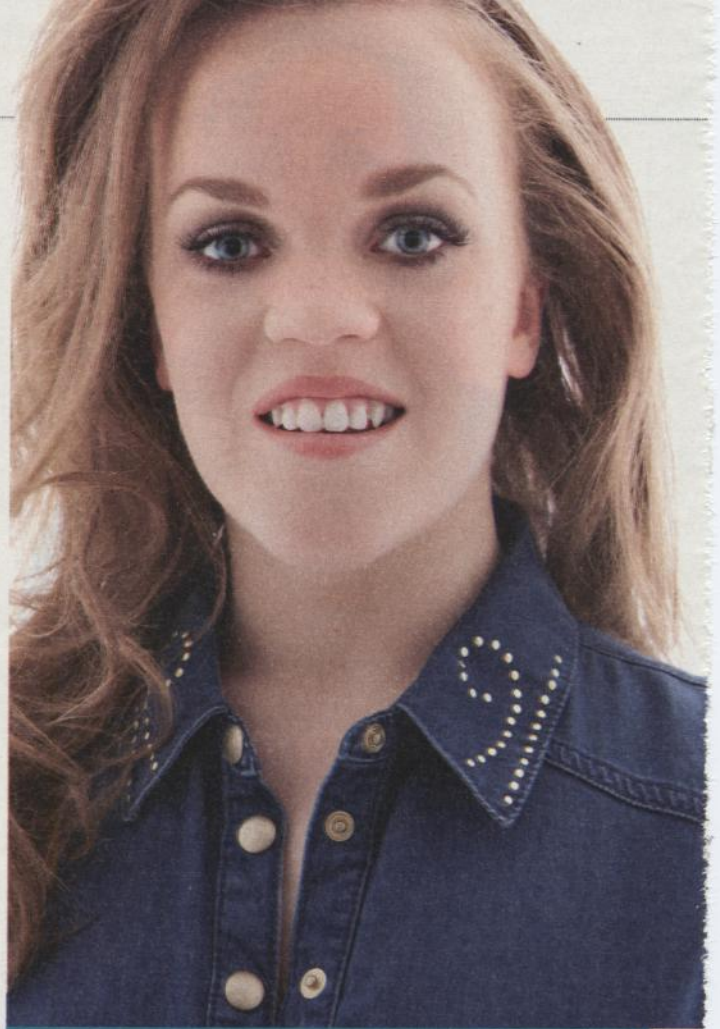
"I don't like seeing how emotional I am in interviews," she says. "I'm different in interviews to real life."

Ellie, quite rightly, is happier letting her supreme talent speak for itself. **f**

**Tell us what you think on Twitter #FabMagEllie**



Clockwise from top: Ellie in the Paralympic pool; with her mum, Val; showing off her gold medal



## SINK OR SWIM

**What's your most treasured possession?**  
My medals.

**Guiltiest pleasure?**  
Singing in the car – I have every album possible.  
Eminem's *Lose Yourself* is my most inspiring song.

**Biggest regret?**  
I came second at the European Championships in 2009, which I felt really bad about. It was two

weeks before my GCSEs. But it inspired me to get back into training.

**Greatest achievement?**  
The Beijing and London Paralympics.

**Favourite smell?**  
Vanilla.

**Worst habit?**  
Snorting when I laugh.

**What was your most embarrassing moment?**  
On a snowy day at school

I fell over in front of everyone. Twice.

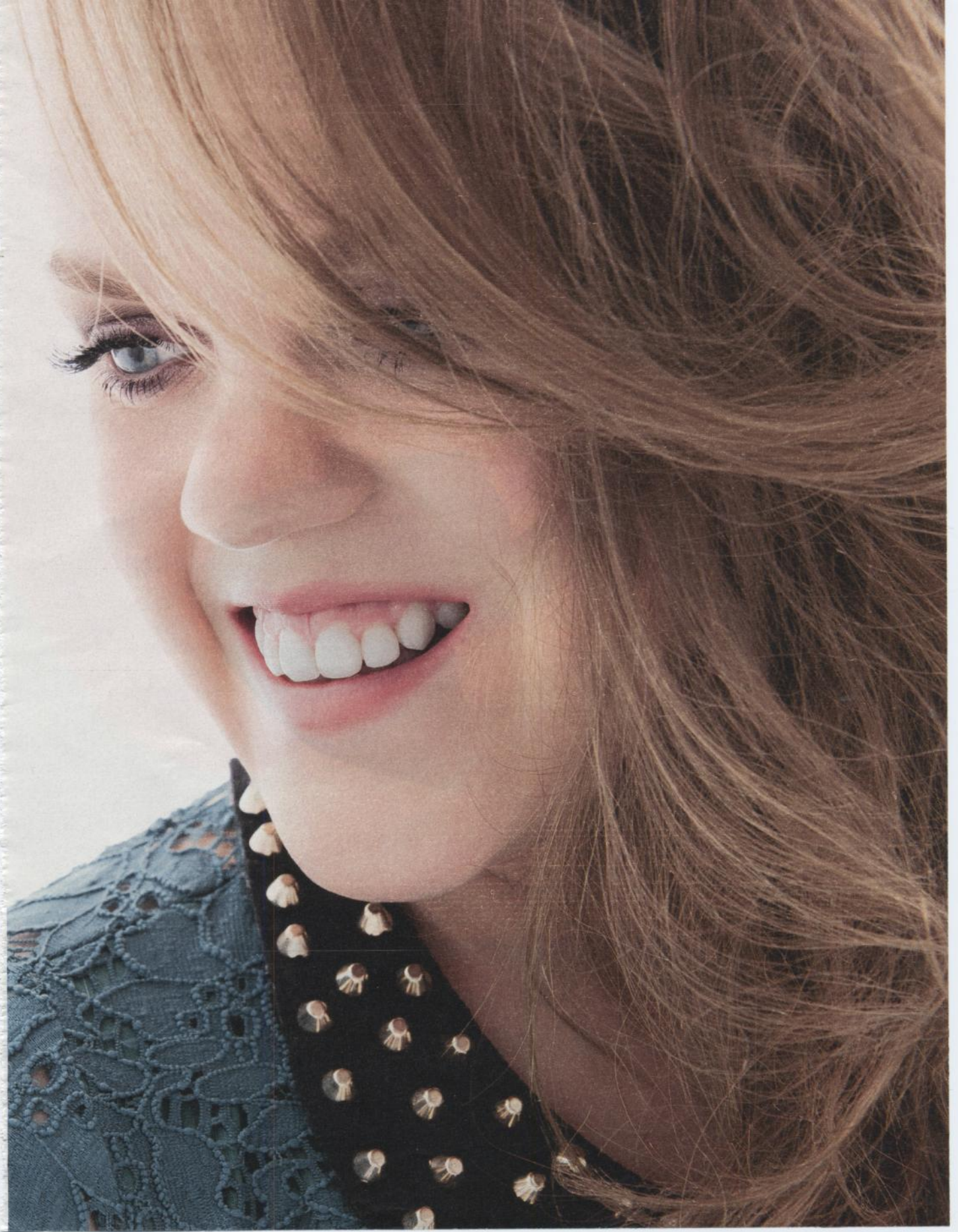
**What would be your superpower of choice?**  
Time travel.

**What time would you visit?**  
A hundred years into the future.

**What was your best piece of advice?**  
You've got to enjoy what you can do.

**What's your secret talent?**  
Dancing!

Hair: Enzo Voge styling Paul Mitchell. Make-up: Jo Ball using Smashbox. Styling: Chloe Wood. Stylist's assistant: Nae Barbour. Additional photography: Getty Images. PA. Ellie wears: dress, Topshop





Ellie wears: dress and belt, River Island; collar and shoes, New Look; ring, Dorothy Perkins

'BIEBER?  
I like Ryan  
GOSLING  
NOW'

Ellie isn't so keen on opening up. The trademark toothy grin surfaces from time to time, but our questions often provoke Ellie's stubborn streak, eliciting typically teenage responses of "dunno" and "don't mind", followed by a determined silence.

She's achieved so much that it's easy to forget how young she still is. Ellie has somehow managed to combine studying and swimming and is now back at Swansea's Olchfa Comprehensive School, where she's studying for A levels in history and world development.

Being a schoolgirl again must be a shock to the system.

"It is strange," she admits. "But it's good. It keeps you in a different mindset, so you're not stressed all the time thinking about swimming. I'd like to go to university."

She says her friends couldn't be happier for her. "They just see me as one of them. We don't talk about swimming, just about normal teenage stuff. What's in the news, all the gossip."

### Normal TEEN

**E**llie is, in many respects, like any other girl her age. She likes listening to Rihanna and going to the cinema ("I just go to an earlier showing so I can be up for training"), she shops in Topshop but gets trousers altered to fit her smaller frame.

She watches *The X Factor* and loved *The Great British Bake Off*. She likes making carrot and walnut muffins and is toying with becoming a chef. "But it changes all the time," she admits. "I've wanted to be a photographer and a forensic scientist, too."

Post-Games, Ellie is enjoying eating chocolate cake without worrying about maintaining her optimum 7st 1lb weight. And she's excited by the free gifts she's being sent on account of her celebrity status. There's been an iPad, some headphones, expensive moisturiser and a Mini – again, adapted to her height – from her sponsors at BMW.

Next month, she will turn 18. What will she do to celebrate? "I haven't thought about it – just be with my friends and family."

There have been "a few" marriage proposals – "at the victory parade there were lots of people holding up boards!" – and Ellie is now expected to earn six-figure sums from sponsorship deals.

"I've got everything I want," she says. "I don't swim for the money. I do it because I love it."

That's not to say she hasn't splashed out. She has a Louis Vuitton handbag and admits: "There's a Mulberry bag I might treat myself to. I've asked for a food mixer for Christmas, so I can't buy that myself."

We broach the subject of boys. Ellie has previously admitted having the hots for Justin Bieber, and her dad said there was a mystery boy she'd been texting. But she says she's single.

"Leading up to the Games you're so busy, so yeah, I haven't had time," she says. "I'm enjoying life as it is at the moment."

And what about Bieber? She sighs.

"That was years ago, when I was 15 or 16.

I've grown out of that. I like Ryan Gosling."

And the boy she's been texting? She rolls her eyes. "My dad doesn't know what he's talking about." Indeed. Whose dad does, when you're 17?

Teenage moans aside, she clearly adores her parents, →